

INDEPENDENCE OF THE SOUTH.

S P E E C H

OF

HON. ROGER A. PRYOR,

OF VIRGINIA,

ON THE

Resolutions reported by the Committee of Thirty-three.

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S P E E C H .

The House resumed the consideration of the special order, being the report of the Special Committee of thirty-three, on which Mr. PRYOR was entitled to the floor.

Mr. PRYOR. Mr. Speaker, the resolutions before the House invite discussion of the issues involved in the present unhappy controversy. The rapid march of events, outstripping the dilatory movements of procrastinating politicians, leaves us but the alternative of peace or war. While your committee compromise have been painfully elaborating plans of adjustment—all “mean variations upon mighty ruins”—the dispute has become incapable of accommodation; and the results their wisdom was to intercept, are now accomplished and irreversible facts. Of the thirty-three States which composed the Confederacy at the ginning of this session, six are no longer members of the Union. Not many days will elapse before others will follow their example. Sir, it is an idle and unmeaning mockery to talk of *preserving* the Union; and they who indulge in this strain of declamation betray little of the candor demanded by the urgency of the occasion. In the presence of so tremendous a catastrophe as that which now oppresses us—the overthrow of Government, the partition of a great empire, and the imminent hazard of civil war—we owe it to ourselves and to the country to be done with the expedites of a timid and temporizing policy, and to address ourselves to the emergency without reserve and without equivocation.

The issue before the country, I repeat, sir, is the simple question of peace or war. Acting, as they conceive, from the impulse of abundant provocation, and exerting a power which they derive from the fundamental principles of this Government, the states of South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana, have renounced the Confederacy and assumed the attitude of independent republics. The party into whose hands the control of the Administration is passing, so far from recourse to conciliatory measures and a recognition of the right of secession, obdurately reject all overtures of compromise, and avow a purpose to employ all the resources of Government for the subjugation of the retiring States. And so it is that the calamities of civil war are about to be precipitated upon the country.

Mr. Speaker, in the suspense of this dreadful expectation, the people of the South are sustained by the conviction that, after the passions and prejudices of the moment have passed away, impartial history will acquit them of responsibility for the consequences of the impending conflict. Whenever, in after times, men shall revert to the events of this period, they will curse the madness of those by whom humanity as so deeply wounded; but not upon us will fall their maledictions. In what oblivion of confederate duty, I demand, have we of the South been found delinquent? Do we not contribute more than an equal proportion to the support of your Government? Has not southern statesmanship successfully guided the councils of the Republic in peace? Has not southern valor gloriously illustrated its arms on the field of battle? To what pledge of confederate faith have we been recreant? Nor is it only in a literal compliance with the obligations of the constitutional compact that the South has exhibited its patriotic fidelity. In our conception, something more was exacted by the association of fellow-citizenship; and we have denied the people of the North no facility in trade, and no advantage of policy which might promote their prosperity. With whose acquiescence, and to whose detriment, were measures of protection enacted for the aggrandizement of your manufacturing interest? Upon the productions of whose industry does your splendid commerce subsist? Until the demon of sectional discord was roused by your invasion of our rights, we willingly bore the burden of unequal tariffs and exclusive bounties, to assist the development of your resources; and your marvelous opulence we contemplated with the pride of fraternal sympathy. In this spirit of unselfish patriotism, Virginia contributed a princely domain to the ascendancy of the North, little dreaming that the States to be born of her bounty would repay her munificence with more than the ingratitude of Lear's unnatural offspring.

Sir, in what manner have the loyalty and devotion of the South been requited by your confederates of the North? I propound the inquiry in no spirit of vindictive accusation. Indeed, sir, I would despise myself no less than the public would reproach

me, if, at this august moment, I should contribute anything to the exasperation of passions already too much inflamed. I advert to the wrongs which the South has endured, with no other view than to vindicate the position she has assumed in this controversy. In what manner, I repeat, has the North repaid the fidelity with which the South has redeemed all the pledges of confederate faith and discharged all the duties of common citizenship?

At the epoch of the revolution, and, indeed, when the Federal Government was organized, slavery prevailed in the North as well as in the South. If not the chief, it was at least conspicuous among the interests for the protection of which our present system of Government was established. The Constitution distinguishes it by express and repeated recognition, in each case fortifying it by particular guarantees.

Now, sir, against this great and vital interest—an interest of which the pecuniary value is indicated by countless millions, and the importance of which, in the more essential aspect of social and political relation, no form of expression can adequately represent; an interest on which subsists the material prosperity of the southern States, and with which their security and independence are inseparably associated,—this interest, so vast and so vital, is the object of organized and incessant assault by those who are bound by every obligation of written covenant and confederate faith to protect it. They have launched against it the anathemas of moral and legal outlawry, and have canvassed Christendom for recruits in the crusade of Abolitionism. They have burdened it with iniquitous and oppressive impositions. They have denied it the development without which it cannot long endure. They have attacked it in detail by every variety of criminal expedient. And, finally, they have essayed, through the instrumentality of servile insurrection, to involve the South in total and irreparable ruin.

These wrongs, I know, appeal in vain to the men by whom they are inflicted; but I can imagine a case analogous in all essential particulars, in the contemplation of which they will not be likely to exhibit so much of insensibility. The manufacturing interest, if not the main, is among the most important of the industrial pursuits of New England. Now, sir, suppose the other States of the Confederacy should combine for the spoliation of this interest, and to that end should hold it up to universal execration; should invoke upon it the vengeance of Heaven, and proclaim it beyond the protection of society; suppose they should employ the agency of Government for its destruction, should organize conspiracies to ravage it, and, to impart the last touch of enormity to the outrage, should inflame the passions of your operatives to bloody and incendiary revolt; who believes the people of New England would patiently endure this accumulation of injuries? If they be capable of so abject a submission, they possess not the spirit of those ancestors of theirs, with whom the most trivial exaction of illegal power was an insufferable oppression. Yet these and greater grievances are endured by the people of the slaveholding States; but you only mock our complaints and tighten the grasp of oppression. Why marvel, then, that the day of resistance and retribution is come at last?

But, sir, we do not rest the vindication of the South on the slavery issue alone, nor mainly. Our adversaries, availing themselves of the prevalent prejudice against slavery, have diligently represented that the secession of the South has no other object than the perpetuation of bondage; and the effect of the misstatement is visible already in the unfriendly criticism of the foreign press. It is time our cause were placed upon the true grounds of defense; upon principles which, instead of insulating it from the sympathies of the world, will command respect wherever justice rules and the maxims of republican liberty are revered. True it is that the grievances of which the South complain affect chiefly the interests of slavery; but it is a narrow and unphilosophical view of the controversy to represent the South as protesting only against those grievances. There, indeed, the weight of the oppression is most heavily felt; but its source must be sought elsewhere. We commit an error in reasoning, and what is worse, a blunder in policy, when we confound the practical effect with the radical principle of tyranny. If we mean to apply the resources of true statesmanship to the disorders of the country, we must discover and correct the organic derangement of the system; otherwise, all our pretentious prescription is but the quaekery of the empiric.

Sir, for fifty years the interests of the South reposed and prospered under the sacred safeguards of the Constitution. By that compact the equality of the States was guaranteed, their right of self-government recognized, and each member of the Confederacy mutually pledged to the others in a spirit of fraternal alliance. The States of the South acceded to the Union on these conditions; on the conditions

that they were to be the peers of their sovereign associates, that their rights were to be inviolable, and their property secure under the protection of the common Government. This sacred covenant was the bond of union between the confederate Republics. The Constitution imposed reciprocal obligations on the States, and pledged them to mutual offices of good-will. In what manner are these pledges redeemed, and these obligations fulfilled, by the northern States?

Foremost in the catalogue of southern grievance is the complaint that the fundamental principle of the Confederacy, the equality of the States, is subverted by a combination between a majority of States to exclude other States from an equal participation in the common domain, and so to deny them equal advantages of expansion and development under the operation of the Federal Government. Nay, this Government itself is abused to the consummation of that iniquity.

To all candid men I appeal, if this single fact of the exclusion of the South from any share and enjoyment of the joint territory of the States, does not involve every circumstance that can rouse the indignation of freemen—a breach of constitutional compact; a stigma of inferiority; a principle of civil disability; and a measure of practical oppression. In private life, individuals resent no grievance sooner than an invasion of their rights of property. Among nations, an encroachment on their territorial possessions is an affront which war alone can redress. But the exclusion of the South from the common domain of the Confederacy, besides these circumstances of insult and aggression, implies a breach of the most solemn stipulation, and a reflection the most offensive on the southern character. For you cannot deny the South equal rights in the Territories, without subverting the principles of the Constitution; and in justification of this wrong, the social system of the South is denounced as the “sum of all villainies.” What other or greater grievance need the South urge in vindication of its conduct?

But this is not all. In respect of another essential condition of Federal Union—the guarantee of State sovereignty, the right reserved by each State to administer its own affairs and to develop its own destinies, in harmony with the general interests of the Confederacy—whatever of this right may have survived the systematic encroachments of Federal usurpation, has vanished before the threat of military coercion. Already sovereign States are reduced, in contemplation, to the condition of provincial dependencies; and that doom they would speedily realize, but for the indomitable spirit which quails not before all the “pomp and circumstance” of your martial preparation.

Perhaps even these radical violations of the Constitution, in its spirit and essence, you may repel as the vague refinements of a temper alert to discover material of sectional crimination. Let us descend, then, for a moment, to a single instance in illustration of the perfidy by which the South is defrauded of its covenanted rights. An explicit provision of the constitutional compact exacts the restitution of fugitive slaves; yet that provision, albeit so essential that, without it, the South originally refused to join the Confederacy, is shamefully annulled by the northern States; and by the default, millions of southern property have been confiscated. So flagrantly has the South been cheated of its constitutional rights and denied the advantages of the Union, all the burdens of which, however, it bears in enormous disproportion!

What stronger argument than this, of violated faith and broken engagements, of the invasion of chartered rights and the usurpation of forbidden power, can be required in vindication, if you please, of revolutionary measures? All writers, except the partisans of divine-right and passive obedience, are agreed that an infraction of the implied contract between sovereign and subject absolves the latter from his allegiance. It is this principle of constitutional liberty which distinguishes the great rebellion and the revolution of 1688 as the most glorious epochs in British history. Say, then, is there less obligation in a solemnly ratified and written compact, than in a tacit and disputed engagement; and are sovereign States denied a redress which the genius of free government guarantees to individuals?

But the defense of the South rests upon still stronger grounds; and her secession from the Confederacy is justified by even higher principles than the right to vindicate a violated covenant. Absolute power is the essence of tyranny, whether the power be wielded by a monarch or a multitude. The dominant section in this Confederacy claims and exercises absolute power—power without limitation and without responsibility; without limitation, since all the restrictions of the Constitution are broken down; and without responsibility, because, in the nature of things, the weaker interest cannot control the majority. Of all species of tyranny, the South is subjected to the most intolerable. Under the rule of a despot, we might hope something of his

impartial indifference between the sections; but to be exposed to the unbridled sway of a majority, adverse in interest, inimical in feeling, and ambitious of domination, is to be reduced to a condition more abject than that of the slaves whose emancipation is the pretext of all this controversy.

It is against this sectional domination, this rule of the majority without law and without limit—a rule asserted in subversion of the Constitution, and established on the ruins of the Confederacy—it is in resistance to this despotic and detestable rule, that the people of the South have taken up arms. This, sir, is the cause of the South; and tell me if cause more just ever consecrated revolution? It is the cause of self-government against the domination of foreign power—the very cause for which our fathers fought in 1776. Sooner than submit to the irresponsible rule of alien interests, they tore themselves from the embrace of the mother country, and staked all in the triumph of *secession*. Washington and Jefferson were the most illustrious of secessionists; and we of to-day are but walking in the light of their glorious example. They held it unworthy of freemen to bear the burden of arbitrary imposition; and they were not conciliated by the deceptive tender of partial representation in the British Parliament. The South has her Representatives in this Capitol; but their voice is of no avail against the northern majority. She is taxed not with her own consent, but by the votes of delegates whom she cannot control.

I repeat, it is against the rule of a sectional despotism that the South demands protection; and it is to assert the cause of civil liberty, that she declares her independence. You of the North lavished your sympathy on the people of Hungary in their revolt against Austrian absolutism; but our cause is identical in principle and in purpose. At this moment, while you bestow admiration and applause on the revolutionists of Italy, I would remind you that the people of the South are moved by the same impatience of alien ascendancy, and the same aspiration for self-government, which, after ages of slumber, have at last awakened the Italians to a recollection of their long-lost liberties.

The cause of the South solicits recognition and regard by yet another consideration—by a consideration which appeals to the interest of every section.

To-day, it is slavery which suffers from the overthrow of constitutional guarantees, and the irresponsible reign of the majority. But, the principle of absolute power once ascendant in the Government, no interest is secure; and circumstances will determine against what object it may be directed. If, in contravention of the compact of Union, slavery may be oppressed by Federal action, the navigation of New England, or the iron interest of Pennsylvania, will be exposed to the same ruin, whenever they shall incur the displeasure or invite the rapacity of other sections. The only safeguard of American liberty is in maintaining the integrity of the Constitution, and preserving intact the limitations of the Government. For that the South contends; and all are alike concerned in the success of her cause.

If, after the endurance of so many wrongs, and the menace of others still more intolerable, anything were wanting to justify the South in the public opinion of the world, it would be supplied by her solicitude to avoid violence, and redress her grievances within the Union. We are reproached, I know, with precipitancy in not awaiting an *overt act* of hostility from the sectional Administration. Sir, in our judgment, a proclamation of war is an *overt act*; and such proclamation we find in the election, by an exclusively sectional vote, of a President pledged to put our rights and our property “in course of ultimate extinction”—a President who admonishes us in advance of his aggressive designs by the sententious but significant declaration, that “they who deny freedom to others do not deserve it themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it.” We could not agree to await inactively the development of the disposition of the President elect; for we claim to hold our rights by some higher and more solid tenure than the capricious temper of any individual. Indeed, the argument of our opponents involves a concession of our case, inasmuch as it implies that the rights of the South are no longer secured by constitutional guarantees, but are suspended on the accident of an unfriendly Administration.

A more imperative consideration still determined the South to act at once, and to act decisively. If negotiation might avail, we thought to strengthen negotiation by a demonstration of our spirit. If the sword alone can reclaim our rights, we were resolved not to be unprepared for the issue.

Mr. Speaker, since the fatal 6th of November to the present hour, the Representatives of the South have invariably exhibited an accommodating disposition. The first day of our session was signalized by a proposition from a colleague of my own, [Mr. BOTELER,] which contemplated a pacific adjustment of our difficulties. A similar movement, likewise originating with a southern man, was initiated in the

Senate. Meanwhile various schemes of settlement have been submitted in one or the other House of Congress, of which, without much regard to their intrinsic efficacy, we have uniformly avowed our support; while on the other side they have been as uniformly rejected with a contemptuous disdain of compromise. Thus, while the South are willing to remain in the Union with an assurance of their rights, the North declare, by a refusal of all concession, that they will destroy the Union rather than renounce their aggressive designs. In the perverted patriotism of the dominant party, the Constitution of Washington is substituted by the platform of Lincoln; and rather than be reproached with logical inconsistency, they choose to incur the guilt of civil war.

And not in the negative sense of rejected compromise only, do this party betray a purpose to push the dispute to the arbitrament of the sword. Instead of a proclamation of conservative policy that should give assurance of peace to a distracted country, their leader announces that his Administration is to be directed by the counsels of the champion of the "irrepressible conflict." Instead of the sense of justice and patriotic spirit which, we were told, still animate the masses of the northern people, northern Legislatures vote men and munitions of war to chastise the resistance roused by their own perfidious violations of a constitutional covenant. And here, while with the one hand Republican Representatives spurn all overtures of peace, with the other they grasp the sword. No measure of conciliation will they pass; their energies are engrossed in contriving schemes of coercion. Day after day develops the completeness of their system of force. Now it is a bill denying South Carolina the facilities of postal communication; anon a bill for the compulsory collection of the revenue at Charleston. In the South, frowning fortresses threaten the subjugation of sovereign States; in this District a hireling soldiery are concentrated to impose an obnoxious ruler on an unwilling people. Auspicious inauguration of a Republican President! Happy presage of a liberal Administration! If the conclusion be but consistent with this encouraging commencement, no doubt the next four years will reconcile the South to the rule of the dominant party.

In aggravation of circumstances, themselves sufficiently exasperating, the rumor, too monstrous for belief, that all these measures of coercion against the South are stimulated and directed by a son whom the South has delighted to honor, in proportion even to his own conceit of his own merit, imparts a tone of deeper indignation to the murmurs of an outraged people.

Thus, Mr. Speaker, by a series of aggressions, of which I have attempted nothing more than an imperfect sketch, the dominant party in the North have effected that which the world in arms could not have accomplished—the overthrow of this once glorious Confederacy. And not content with an achievement that will burden their memory through all coming ages, they now propose to consummate their work by afflicting the country with the calamities of civil war.

Mr. Speaker, we of the South maintain that among the fundamental and essential articles of the Republican faith is the doctrine that the States, having subscribed the constitutional compact on their own independent volition and in the exercise of an inherent sovereignty, have the right, perfect and inviolable, to renounce the Union whenever, in their judgment, the Constitution is annulled and the Union abused to their oppression. Nay, in the very act of assent to the league of confederation, Virginia and other States, by express stipulation, reserved to themselves the right to resume their original sovereignty whenever, in their opinion, the conditions of alliance might be violated. As we understand it, this is an association of coequal sovereignties, held in fraternal embrace by the sweet influences of reciprocal confidence and regard; not a system of reluctant and oppressive connection, bound together by the fetters of Federal force. Nor have the people of the South contemplated the right of secession as a vain speculative proposition, but have cherished it as an actual and inestimable muniment of republican liberty. It is precisely in this particular that the citizens of the United States have the advantage of the people of all other countries; in that, when the checks and balances of the central Government are overthrown, there remains the rampart of State sovereignty, behind which they may rally and maintain their rights; and in the still more important particular, that, through the instrumentality of secession, they may recover their liberties by the organic operation of the system, without recourse to the dreadful extremity of revolution.

These principles, it appears by too many distressing indications, are not prevalent in the councils of the dominant party. Their cry is for coercion. They present the South no other alternative than submission or subjugation. Sir, it is no easy

effort to debate an issue of this sort ; and the impulse of a gallant people is to answer menace by defiance. But we owe it to the solemnity of the occasion to repress every ebullition of resentment, and to discuss even an offensive topic in a spirit of moderation.

What, then, I would entreat of gentlemen on the other side, do they propose by kindling the flames of civil war ? No matter what may be the issue, liberty cannot survive the conflict. The frail fabric of a system constructed for the abode of peace, would perish under the shocks and concussions of intestine strife. An armed encounter between the States would be fatal to a Constitution designed to hold them in amicable association ; and your Union would go down with the principle of mutual consent on which it reposes. He must be inattentive to the plainest lessons of history who does not foresee that from a bloody struggle among the States—*bellum plus quam civile*—either anarchy would emerge to brood over the land with desolating presence, or else military violence would assert its iron sway. What though the fortune of war be propitious to your arms ? You must be content with nothing less than the annihilation of the South ; for while she breathes, the impulse of honor will throb in her bosom, and urge her to still further resistance. Recollect the story of Ireland's wrongs and Ireland's emancipation. The remorseless conqueror doomed her to desolation ; but fate reserved her as a dependent province of the British Empire. How, as a thorn in England's side, she avenged herself on the tyrant, and at last extorted from his fears the recognition of her rights, your intelligence needs not to be instructed. And so would your difficulty be our opportunity.

Imagine, then, for a moment, the complete subjugation of the South ; after every spark of vitality is extinguished, and her inanimate form lies prostrate before you, tell me, what recompence do you gain for all your sacrifices, or what consolation in the tormenting memory of your fratricidal deed ?

But I dismiss the humiliating thought. No matter what her inferiority of force, you cannot subjugate the South. Smitten she may be, but not subdued ; defeated, but never dismayed. Already, by her determined and defiant attitude, she gives you earnest of the spirit that will animate her sons in the hour of trial. From many memorable examples of heroic resistance to wrong, they derive the consolatory assurance that a brave people battling for the right are invincible against any odds. Nine million of freemen—and heed not, I admonish you, the treacherous suggestion that the South will not oppose a united front to the foe—nine million of freemen, of a race the most energetic and indomitable recorded in history, glorying in traditions of ancestral prowess, and attached to the cause of liberty with a chivalric devotion—this people, themselves distinguished for valor and the genius of war, contending on their own soil for whatever imparts a felicity to life—this people will laugh to scorn all the imposing array of your military preparation.

Not for themselves, then, do they deprecate a conflict of arms ; but from respect to the memory of our common ancestry ; for the sake of a land to be rent by the cruel lacerations of the sword ; and in reverence of virtues a benign religion instructs them to adore. By the persuasion of these pious and pathetic importunities we would soothe in every breast the spirit of strife, and invoke the pacific intervention of reason for the adjustment of our disputes.

And what, I pray you, is the dictate of reason ? Not, surely, that a free people should be held in subjection to a Government they detest ; not that the sword be employed to coerce sovereign States, and constrain them to wear the yoke of an odious and oppressive association ; but rather that distinct communities be permitted to follow the bent of their peculiar nationality, and to realize the destiny indicated by their own interests and their own aspirations. You of the North hold in your grasp the elements of a great empire—a teeming population, immense resources, and a daring energy of genius which surmounts all obstacles, and dazzles the world with its exploits. For our part, in slight esteem as you affect to hold the South, we are content with our portion. Whosoever occasion shall require—and occasion does now demand it—we are prepared to assert our equality among the sovereigns of the earth, and to make good the claim against all comers.

Instead, then, of vainly essaying to counteract the designs of nature, let us heed the voice of reason ; instead of lamenting the rupture of an artificial tie, as involving the ruin of all our hopes, let us lean on the wisdom of Providence, persuaded that as He has already distinguished the epoch of revolution as the most glorious in the annals of America, He intends still farther to advance the cause of freedom and civilization by means of another dissevered nationality.

